

Islamist Decision-Making

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Introduction

“Why do they hate us?” Since September 11, 2001, Americans have asked themselves this question time and again. The desire to understand what motivated the 9/11 terrorists, as well as their many Muslim sympathizers, is perfectly understandable. But of all the questions posed by 9/11, this one is easiest to answer, because the answer is banal. The United States is hated not primarily for what it is, or for what it does, but for what it has: overwhelming power. It is this vast accumulation of power that causes the United States to be resented, and sometimes even hated, not only in the Muslim world but also in parts of Europe. Power in the hands of a few is resented, and great power is greatly resented.

The more complicated question posed by 9/11 is not “Why do they hate us?” but “Why did they attack us?” There are people around the world who are angry at the United States, and who subscribe to a potent and even virulent anti-Americanism. Yet they do not resort to violence. The more power a state possesses, the more likely it is to be resented—and the more likely its power will suffice to deter its adversaries. Immense power creates antagonism among those who do not share it, but it simultaneously deters them—unless something goes awry.

On 9/11, American deterrence broke down. A group of extreme Islamists plotted an act of mass terrorism on an unprecedented scale, effectively declaring war on the United States. They would not have done so if they did not believe themselves capable of winning that war. What led them to their decision? What assumptions and assessments informed it? What vision did it reflect? Why did they dare? And would they dare again?

An enemy like no other

There is no more pressing challenge facing the United States than understanding how Al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other Islamist groups make their calculations and reach their decisions. It is a familiar kind of challenge. During the decades of the Cold War, the United States invested immense resources in analyzing how the Soviet Union made decisions, with the aim of deterring and containing the Soviets. Anything less than total success in that effort would have run the risk of nuclear war. A precise understanding of Soviet decision-making was crucial in establishing a stable regime of deterrence between the two superpowers. It also allowed the United States to calibrate its pressure on the Soviet Union carefully and to finesse U.S. responses to the implosion of the Soviet empire and the Soviet regime itself.

The challenge is a familiar one. Not so the adversary. The United States and the Soviet Union had different ideologies, but they shared the same material rationality. They could decode one another. In Al-Qaeda, as well as in some other Islamist movements and groups, the code is entirely

or partially overwritten by another one: a religious rationality. In it, history is read as a series of divine interventions, which Muslims can bring forward or delay by their actions. Some of the trademark Islamist actions—such as “self-martyrdom” (suicide) attacks and the deliberate killing of innocents—are seen by their perpetrators not only as “poor men’s warfare,” but as religiously rational deeds. They are sacrifices meant to propitiate God and provoke him into making the world just. In a just world, it is the Muslims who would enjoy the overwhelming power now exercised by God’s enemies. There is nothing new in the idea of history as being God’s to determine. But we are so far removed from it that we have difficulty understanding how it still operates within a strategy.

There is another reason that Al-Qaeda, as well as other Islamist movements and groups, poses threats unlike any the United States has faced in recent years. The terror generated by Islamism is qualitatively different. Not only does it seek to overturn the existing order—an objective of many terrorist groups throughout history. It is guided by the idea of an absolute dichotomy between the faithful and the faithless, in which the faithless reside almost beyond the perimeters of humankind, both legally and morally. Because the faithless lack the most fundamental attribute of humanity—true belief in God and his religion, Islam—no universal code of conduct or international rule of war binds the believers in fighting against them. Islamist *jihad* approximates a form of total warfare. The most significant constraints upon its conduct are external.

Breaking the code

The purpose of this paper is to make generalizations about Islamist decision-making, focusing on non-state actors that have employed terrorism over the past twenty years. Each actor functions in a unique setting; each has its own capabilities and constraints. Structures differ widely from actor to actor, and so do the actual dynamics of decision-making. Al-Qaeda, for example, acts internationally and loosely, across national borders and with affiliates of different nationalities. Hizbullah, in contrast, is very hierarchical, relies overwhelmingly on members of one Lebanese sect, and tends to operate within Lebanon’s borders. Al-Qaeda and Hizbullah also belong to completely different (and often mutually hostile) sub-cultures within contemporary Islamism.

At the same time, Al-Qaeda and Hizbullah subscribe to a shared analysis of the kind of struggle in which they are engaged, even though they wage their battles on different fronts. Both regard themselves as doing battle against a vast, U.S.-orchestrated conspiracy to crush Islam. No less significantly, they learn and borrow from one another. It was Al-Qaeda that brought the suicide or “self-martyrdom” operation to perfection on 9/11 in New York and Washington. But it was Hizbullah that first devised and legitimized it almost twenty years earlier, against U.S. targets in Beirut. The successes or setbacks of one group provide lessons to its peers.

So while the specific circumstances of each group must never be ignored, this paper is structured by what Islamist groups share in common. It is comprised not of case studies, but of thematic investigations of the components that make up Islamist choices. No matter how a group is structured, no matter what its capabilities and constraints, its decisions will rest on interpretations of history and time, identification of enemies and targets, choice of strategies and tactics, and measurement of success and failure. There is enough evidence to decode these decisions, at least in the cases of Islamist groups that talk about them.

Al-Qaeda and Hizbullah are prime cases, because they are especially talkative, and because they have a history of violent actions rationalized in words. Much (although not all) of that violence has been directed against the United States, so that these are immediately relevant cases. But Al-Qaeda and Hizbullah share a great deal with Islamist groups that have focused on other enemies and targets, such as the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the Egyptian Islamic Group, the Iraq-based Ansar al-Islam, the Harakat-ul-Mujahedeen in Kashmir, and more. While these groups do not have records of systematically targeting the United States, they do strike U.S. allies in an effort to undermine its policies. While the emphasis will be on those groups that have recently or are currently targeting the United States, some of the conclusions will be applicable to other groups as well.

Finally, it is important to note that there are Islamist groups that do not see violent action as an alternative. Their decision-making is confined to political and social choices. These Islamists are interesting in and of themselves, but they pose no threat to the United States. For the purposes of this study, Islamism and Islamists should be understood as shorthand for those who use violence to advance an ideology and an agenda formulated in terms of Islam. They are the ones who struck in New York and Washington on 9/11, and who have struck other targets across the globe. Islamism is not always implicated in violence—except for the purposes of this study.

Themes, questions, conclusions

This essay will unpack Islamist decisions into six segments or themes:

1. History, power, and time.

What is the Islamist reading of history? How do they read the advances of democracy and globalization? What is the role of eschatology and apocalyptic millenarianism? Do they have a concrete future vision?

2. The paradox of America.

How do Islamists explain the distribution of power in the modern world? How do Islamists read the paradoxical association of materialism,

freedom, religion, and power represented by the United States? How do they assess America's strengths and weaknesses?

3. Between word and sword.

Under which circumstances do Islamists choose persuasion, and under which do they choose violence? Are they provoked into violence by the perceived weakness of their adversaries, or by the use of violence against them? Are the cultures of revenge and martyrdom independent factors that drives overall strategy? How much cost-benefit analysis is invested in decisions about resort to force?

4. Targets for every season.

When Islamists choose violence, what priorities guide their selection of targets? What military, legal, and moral considerations are invoked in the internal deliberations of Islamist groups over means and ends? How do Islamist movements draw and re-draw redlines (civilian targets, Muslims and non-Muslims, WMD)?

5. Islamist intelligence.

How do Islamists collect and process information about their perceived enemies? What sources do they regard as credible? What capabilities of their adversaries do they think are important enough to measure and monitor? Which biases affect the ways they interpret information? How do those biases shape strategy?

6. Islamist metrics for success.

What measures do Islamists use to determine whether they have succeeded or failed? How do they understand events like 9/11 and regime change (Afghanistan, Iraq)? What events persuade them that they are winning or losing?

Operative conclusions on deterring Islamist terrorism will be drawn here:

7. Deterring Islamists.

What do these people fear most? Is there something they supremely value (family, comrades, honor) the possible loss of which might deter them? What do they see as their own weaknesses, which might be exploited by enemies? Is there a difference in the effectiveness of deterrent measures used by internal (Muslim) actors and external (non-Muslim) actors? What is the most effective mix of coercive force and propaganda?

1. History, Power, and Time

What is the Islamist reading of history? How do they read the advances of democracy and globalization? What is the role of eschatology and apocalyptic millenarianism? Do they have a concrete future vision?

Beneath the day-to-day strategies of Islamists, there are narratives about the past, the present, and the future. Some of these narratives are historical and political. Others are eschatological and theological. Often they overlap. But their basic assumptions are identical: in perfect worlds past, Muslims had great power; in the present imperfect world, they lack such power; but by certain acts, inspired by faith, Muslims can restore power to themselves. Some Islamists even believe they can move forward the second hand of the eschatological clock toward the “end of days.”

The Source of Power

When we assess great agglomerations of power in history—including our own—we are mindful of their many determinants. The most important of these, we think, are superior social organization and an open culture of adaptation—that is, the ability of a society to reorganize repeatedly on new bases, to meet new challenges. We assume that power is acquired and maintained through a process of constant and relentless innovation.

Islamists, too, ponder the repeated rise and fall of past power centers. They are steeped in the histories of the Arab and Ottoman empires—the former carried Islam across Asia and Africa, the latter propelled it deep into Europe. But to their minds, power is not the result of superior social organization or an open culture of adaptation. God confers power, and his own never-waning power constitutes an inexhaustible energy source superior to any other, which Muslims can tap through belief. The Islamist narrative of Muslim history is one of Muslims attaining belief—and power—and then losing belief—and power. The process of gaining and losing power is a process of finding and losing God. “Whenever the Muslims hold on to their religion,” says Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman, who inspired the first World Trade Center bombing (1993), “they manage to defeat their enemies. But when they are fragmented and disunited, as they are now, their enemies manage to defeat them.” He adds that Muslims “cannot be defeated from the outside; we are not concerned from the numbers of our enemies nor by their resources. We are only concerned with being defeated from within.”

Because of this understanding, Islamists do not seek to learn the “secrets” of how the West attained its present power. The attempt to achieve parity with the modern West by emulating it, especially in social organization, is anathema to Islamists. In their view, since the West’s or-

ganization is secular, adopting it can only distance Muslims from their faith, and therefore weaken them. Its very propagation, under the guise of modernization or Westernization, is regarded as a conspiracy to keep Muslims weak. If Muslims wish to regain the primacy they enjoyed in the past, they must rediscover Islam and govern their lives exclusively by its rules. Renewal, not innovation, will restore Muslims to their rightful place.

Golden Ages

Islamist emulation is focused not on the modern West's successes, but on what are regarded as "golden ages" of Muslims themselves—those periods in history when religious fervor and martial prowess combined to produce conquests. The paradigmatic models, in descending order of importance, are the Prophet Muhammad's triumphs and the early Arab conquests (seventh century), the counter-offensive against the Crusades led by Saladin (twelfth century), and the campaigns led by Mehmed the Conqueror culminating in the conquest of Byzantium (sixteenth century).

The anti-repertoire—instances in which Muslims faced defeat and lost territory—includes the fall of Granada (fifteenth century), the demise of the Ottoman Empire (from the seventeenth century), and the loss of Jerusalem (twentieth century). (This does not begin to exhaust Islamist historical references, and Shi'ite Islamists tend to be influenced by a dissident reading of Islamic history, which has its own "golden ages" and heroes.)

The discourse of Islamists is saturated with references, direct and indirect, to these episodes in Islamic history. The message of all such references is that Muslims, by reliance on faith, have successfully defied the odds and defeated enemies possessed of superior numbers, capabilities, or defenses. When Muslims have abandoned the faith, they have faced defeat and humiliation, often by lesser forces. Specific references to wars, battles, and heroes from the distant past resonate with Muslim viewers, listeners, and readers. In Muslim societies, there is an intensive reiteration of historical "lessons"—in the curriculum of educational systems, the offerings of the media, and the preaching in mosques. Ubiquitous monuments—from glory days—make this history vivid.

Conspiracy Against Islam

While the faith of Muslims may ebb and flow, one constant remains: the drive of Islam's enemies to undermine and destroy it. These enemies have adopted various guises throughout history. In earlier centuries they appeared as Christian crusaders and conquistadors, bearing the cross and waging a religious war against Islam. Europe subsequently underwent secularization, but the British, French, and other empires continued the war against Islam, replacing the cross with a "civilizing mission." Later the atheistic Soviet Union took up the war against Islam, in the name of socialist egalitarianism. Now, the war against Islam is led by the materialistic United States, which poses as a bearer of democracy and reform.

In the Islamist reading of history, the Frankish crusader, the British proconsul, the Soviet commissar, and the American adviser have been parties to the longest-running conspiracy in human history. Their purpose has been to check the advance of Islam, reverse its progress, and ultimately destroy it. The Islamists have a term for this conspiracy against Islam: *sal-ibiyya*, or “Crusaderism.” True, admit the Islamists, the historical Crusades were only one battle in the war against Islam. But the Crusaders, by their open hostility to Islam, revealed the true aim of the conspiracy.

Since that time, say the Islamists, the conspirators have learned to conceal their real objective behind universal slogans such as modernization and democracy. But these slogans are a ruse, to hide their pursuit of the same ends as the medieval Crusaders: Islam’s eradication. To bring home this point, Islamists—and not just Osama bin Laden—regularly label the Americans as Crusaders. They are but the latest incarnation of the ever-evolving plot to besiege and destroy God’s community of believers on earth.

In this Islamist reading of history, the conspiracy against Islam is also an alliance. The junior partner in that alliance is the Jews. They were present in seventh-century Arabia when God revealed himself to the Prophet Muhammad. From the outset, they cast doubt on the revelation and passed into treacherous opposition, so much so that the Prophet had to wage war against them and banish them from Arabia. When European powers retreated from their Muslim possessions, Zionist Jews persuaded the West to establish the state of Israel, as a Western guard post in the heart of the Muslim world. In the Islamist vision, Jewish minorities in Western countries, particularly the United States, are crucial in determining the priorities of the alliance against Islam. Islamists differ over the relative importance they assign to the Jews in the conspiracy against Islam, some claiming that the Jews are actually its masterminds, while others (like Osama bin Laden) locate them in second place. But the fact of their complicity is not in doubt.

The third partner in the conspiracy is nominal Muslims, who fall into two categories. First, there are the secular rulers who govern most Muslims. Islamists regard them as foreign agents who have struck a Faustian bargain with the enemies of Islam. The rulers work to erase the presence of Islam from every sphere of public life and diligently oppress the true believers, leaving Muslims vulnerable to the conspiracy against them. In return, foreign powers give rulers the support necessary to assure their continued hold on power. Foreign support guarantees that no one can overthrow these nominally Muslim rulers, although foreigners also deny these rulers the instruments of power by which they might threaten the foreign hegemony.

The second category is nominal Muslims who belong to an errant sect. For Sunni Islamists, this often includes Shi‘ite Muslims, deemed a fifth column within Islam set to undermine it. Shi‘ite Muslims often have a similar view of so-called “Wahhabism,” “Salafism,” and related varieties

of Sunni Islam. While some Islamists openly work toward ecumenical reconciliation of different Muslim sects, many actively engage in sectarian agitation, claiming that this or that sect is in alliance with the foreign enemies of Islam.

The most developed aspect of Islamist thought is the identification of the enemy and the analysis of its nature. The establishment of a conspiratorial continuum, from the seventh century to the present, requires that Islamists “fill in the dots” and establish linkages between events, periods, and actors. Islamists understand that without this intellectual effort, the threat facing Islam would remain blurred, and Muslims would be incapable of identifying its strengths and weaknesses—and acting effectively against it.

History Gone Awry

In the Islamist view, the history of Islam’s relationship to power has been one of ebb and flow. There have been high points and low points, great victories and abject defeats.

Islamists would agree with most Western historians, that the most recent centuries have seen an almost continuous and unbroken decline in Islam’s power. Islam’s frontiers have not been in a state of flux, but of continuous retreat. Not only did Muslims lose their vast empires. By the beginning of the twentieth century, most Muslims were subjects of European empires. At the end of the First World War, the last of the great Muslim empires, the Ottoman Empire, was dismantled by European might, and the Arab heartlands of Islam became subject to direct foreign rule.

It is here that the Islamist narrative takes its own particular turn. Most Western historians would describe the later twentieth century as an era of Third World independence struggles and decolonization—a reversal of the Western expansion that began with the great explorations. Formal European empires disappeared, leaving Muslims to rule about fifty independent states.

Islamists, however, depict the twentieth century as one of continuing Muslim decline, in which one form of colonialism simply replaced another. Behind a façade of formal independence, Islam’s present-day enemies have continued their scheme of domination by new and insidious methods and techniques. The three most significant: (1) the present division of the Muslim world, along artificial lines, into a multitude of weak states; (2) the installation of and support for pliant rulers at the head of these states; and (3) the creation and maintenance of Israel as a platform for dominating the core of the Muslim world. As a result, Muslims are actually weaker than at any time in their history.

Nevertheless, Islamists regard the present as a great turning point in their fortunes. It is a time of awakening. The Islamist vanguard has laid bare the plots of Islam’s enemies. Thanks to their words, more and more Muslims are beginning to see through the façade concealing the plot to

weaken and dispossess them. And thanks to their deeds, Muslims are beginning to realize that they have the key to restore their power.

That key is belief. In setting after setting, a few believing Muslims have caused Islam's enemies to retreat, by their readiness to be martyrs "in the path of God." The Iranian revolution twenty-five years ago demonstrated the potential of belief to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles to power. The Islamist victory over the Soviet Union in Afghanistan—for which Islamists claim complete credit—is held up as an example of the power of Islamic faith not only to defeat a superpower, but to bring about its fall. It is cited as proof that the present distribution of power in the world—a distribution massively favoring non-Muslims over Muslims—can be altered if only Muslims show the same determination as that shown by the Afghan mujahideen. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian lieutenant of Osama bin Laden, has explained the significance of that victory:

The Soviet Union, a superpower with the largest land army in the world, was destroyed, and the remnants of its troops fled Afghanistan before the eyes of the Muslim youths as a result of their actions. That *jihad* was a training course of the utmost importance to prepare Muslim mujahideen to wage their awaited battle against the superpower that now has sole dominance over the globe, namely, the United States.

The fall of the Soviet Union has left the United States as the world's last superpower—indeed, as the greatest hyper-power in human history. For many Islamists, this moment holds vast historical significance. As they see it, Muslim awakening and American hegemony represent entirely antithetical visions of the world, and they are on a collision course. For Islamists, 9/11 had the effect of bringing that conflict into sharp relief, even for those who did not support the attacks. Islamists invoke the ferocity of the American response, from Afghanistan to Iraq, as evidence that the United States is waging war against Islam. They claim that Islam is now under siege by the greatest power on earth, and that now is the moment for Muslims to rally to the defense of their faith.

2. The Paradox of America

How do Islamists explain the distribution of power in the modern world? How do Islamists read the paradoxical association of materialism, freedom, religion, and power represented by the United States? How do they assess America's strengths and weaknesses?

The United States presents a paradox for many in the Muslim world. At the time when Europe and Islam were engaged in great seesaw battles—that is, for most of Islam's first millennium—Europe was the West. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when European imperialism began to overwhelm the centers of Islamic sovereignty, the United States was engrossed in its own pursuit of independence, and then in its own westward expansion. Muslims knew that the United States was a daughter of Europe, but they also knew it to be a rebellious one. Well into the twentieth century, many Muslim intellectuals regarded it as a corrective to the excesses of Europe, on which liberty-seeking Muslims might fix some hope.

After World War Two, anti-Americanism first surfaced in the rhetoric of secular Arab nationalism (e.g., Nasser, the Ba'th Party), which increasingly cast the United States as complicit in the creation of Israel and as responsible for Cold War interventions in Arab domestic politics. But the nationalist variety of anti-Americanism was mostly political—that is, it expressed resentment against U.S. policies.

Islamists have gone far beyond a critique of U.S. policies, to articulate a vision of the United States as a cultural threat to Islam and Muslims. The first Islamist to interpret disagreement with the United States in cultural terms was an Egyptian education official, Sayyid Qutb, who spent more than two years in America from 1948. America repelled him on every level. It was, he claimed, a disastrous combination of ruthless materialism and egoistic individualism that commercialized women and practiced a ferocious racism. (The United States was a segregated country, and Qutb, as a dark-skinned Egyptian, may have experienced racism first-hand.) This same Sayyid Qutb developed the idea of “crusaderism,” and he was the first Islamist to identify the United States as a new incarnation of the anti-Islam.

According to Qutb and the subsequent elaborators of his Islamist narrative, this new incarnation is even more dangerous and insidious than earlier ones. This is because the United States has produced an eclectic model of culture, society, and politics that pretends to universal validity. It transcends the boundaries between civilizations by its appeal to material aspirations. One present-day Islamist (in an article entitled “The America We Hate”) cast America as the embodiment of godless, corrupting materialism:

This is the America that occupies the world with the culture of sex and deviation.... This is the American civilization whose object is the body and its means is materialism. The spirit has no place in the system of American values. They are dressed with Christian clothes on hearts that know nothing but stealing, robbing, and occupying the possessions of others. Has America left one place in our lives as Muslims without corrupting it?

Unlike Christianity, which Islamists regard as a weak religion in retreat, American materialism exercises such a seductive and corrupting appeal that it threatens to bring about what one Islamist thinker has called “the extinction of the distinctive identity of the Islamic community”—this, without a continuous military presence or a sustained occupation of Muslim lands. This final assault on Islam is concealed beneath a succession of American slogans, such as human rights, new world order, and democracy. In reality, claim Islamists, these are not America’s ideals, but America’s pretexts for repeated intervention in Muslim lands.

The eternal struggle between belief and unbelief, truth and falsehood, now takes the form of Islamic spirituality versus American materialism. There are Islamists who have drawn a distinction between the American people and the American government. But the more recent history of Islamist perceptions of America has been to collapse that distinction, and to see both the people and its government as products of American culture, itself the antithesis of Islamic culture. Nowhere is that more evident than in the Islamist representation of democracy.

The question of democracy is not a new one in the Arab-Muslim world. As parts of this world came under the sway of the British empire, Muslims became aware of the connection between power and democracy. But Europe provided a counter-model, of power wedded to authoritarianism. Because the Muslim tradition of government had been one of patrimonial authoritarianism, Arab-Muslim rulers and thinkers borrowed more readily from pre-French Revolution absolutism, and later from the one-party model exemplified by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The Arab-Muslim world borrowed from Europe precisely those forms of government that shunned democracy.

To Muslim observers, the United States is different from the states of Europe in that it has always been democratic and, indeed, it restored democracy to Europe itself within living memory. The United States is therefore perceived as the very embodiment of democracy, demonstrating all the capabilities and vulnerabilities of a democratic system. And for Islamists, democracy is the system of government that competes most directly with the system of government Islamists wish to impose: a regime of Islamic law (the Shari‘a).

For Islamists, God has revealed this law, and it is his blueprint for his creation. In the Islamist narrative, in the perfect Islamic state—the paradigmatic state founded by the Prophet Muhammad—Islamic law gov-

erned *all* aspects of public life. Their critique of the existing social and political order is that Islamic law has been disestablished in most countries of the region, or its application has been confined to limited spheres of life. This constriction of Islamic law was a deliberate act of Western imperialism and its slavish imitator, secular nationalism. Islamists regard the neglect of Islamic law as a prime cause of Muslim weakness, and their agenda is the restoration of a golden age of rule through reinstitution of Islamic law.

In a profound sense, democracy—rule of *man's* law—is the antithesis of an Islamist order: rule of *God's* law. Even when Islamists are arrayed against despotic regimes, they cannot bring themselves to fully endorse the democratic alternative, even as a tactical maneuver. In sum, Islamists regard the democracy project of the United States as a threat to their own project, as much as it is a threat to despotic, non-Islamist regimes. Were democracy to triumph, it might perpetuate the exclusion of the Islamists from power, by invoking the sovereignty of the people and “the rule of law”—manmade law. There are instances of Islamist movements sending delegates to parliaments. Islamist Iran even *has* a parliament. But the parliamentary delegates of Islamist movements are usually not their leaders, and the parliament in Iran has been deliberately configured to be weaker than other ruling institutions. While it may be possible to reconcile Islam and democracy (through a reformation), Islamism and democracy are at opposite poles philosophically, and this pushes their respective champions to opposite poles politically.

For Islamists, therefore, the United States represents not just a rival model, but a hostile one, and its claims are as universal as those of any religion. Indeed, for Islamists, the values propagated by the United States *are* a religion, avidly promoting the false gods of its debased culture, even as it preaches “tolerance” for other religions. As Islamists are acutely aware, the United States has amassed unprecedented power. But this is an aberration in history, which is a kind of test for Muslims. Throughout Muslim history, Muslims have faced overwhelming power. The very first Muslims faced the might of Byzantium and the Sassanid legions, the superpowers of the day, and yet they defeated them. In our time, Muslim believers have also gone to battle against the superpowers of the day, the Soviet Union and the United States. They defeated the former, thus bringing about its collapse. It is now the turn of the latter. It is a matter of correctly identifying the weaknesses of the United States and exploiting them.

America the Weak

At the core of the Islamist message, then, is this assertion: The United States is a giant with feet of clay. There are chinks in the imposing armor of the hyper-power. In statement after statement, Islamist thinkers reassure their followers: do not be deceived, the United States can and will be defeated.

Sometimes the argument is subtle. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, formerly spiritual mentor of Lebanon's Hizbullah, once put it this way: "Reports about the multifaceted and unrivaled strength of the United States are greatly exaggerated." While America looms large, "its shadow is greater than its substance. It possesses great military power, but that power is not supported by commensurate political or economic strength." This idea of the internal weakness of the United States is a recurrent trope among Islamist thinkers, because it provides hope that the vastly asymmetrical power relations of the present are transient. "Power is not the eternal destiny of the powerful," Fadlallah reminds Hizbullah. "Weakness is not the eternal destiny of the weak. We may not have the actual power the U.S. has, but we had the power previously and we have now the foundations to develop that power in the future."

Sometimes the argument blatantly invokes God's very own determination to defeat America. The Saudi Islamist who issued the first *fatwa* (of many) in support of 9/11 made this argument:

Because [the Americans] have reached the peak of tyranny and arrogance; because they have seen the collapse of the Soviet Union in the hands of the Muslims in Afghanistan, they thought that they are the ultimate power above which there is no power. Unfortunately, they forgot that God, the exalted and mighty, is stronger than them and can humble and destroy them.

And then this promise:

Just as God has used the United States in order to destroy the Soviet Union, so he will take revenge against the Americans by destroying them.

The prime evidence for the weakness of the United States is its own failure, at numerous times over the past twenty-five years, to stand its ground in confrontations with Islamists. Osama bin Laden said precisely this, in describing the American retreat from Somalia in 1993:

After a little resistance, the American troops left after achieving nothing. They left after claiming that they were the largest power on earth. They left after some resistance from powerless, poor, unarmed people whose only weapon is the belief in God almighty, and who do not fear the fabricated American media lies. We learned from those who fought there, that they were surprised to see the low spiritual morale of the American fighters in comparison with the experience they had with the Russian fighters [in Afghanistan]. The Americans ran away from those fighters who fought and killed them.... If the U.S. still thinks and brags that it still has this kind of power even after all these successive defeats in

Vietnam, Beirut, Aden, and Somalia, then let them go back to those who are awaiting their return.

It is this conviction that the United States can be made to retreat because of its “low spiritual morale” that animates Al-Qaeda and its successors and imitators.

The Islamists, despite their ideological reductionism and doctrinaire tunnel-vision, have been adept at identifying and probing America’s vulnerabilities. They have directed and timed their violence precisely in ways that would open up existing fissures between the United States and its Muslim and Arab clients, between the United States and its Western allies, and within American public opinion.

At crucial points, they have underestimated the United States. Certainly the U.S. response to 9/11, which culminated in the ousting of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, surprised Islamists: it did not conform to earlier U.S. responses to terrorist acts. And Islamists have not anticipated the resolve the United States has demonstrated in its operations against Al-Qaeda and in the multi-front “war on terror.” In that sense, 9/11 was a tactical Islamist success, but Islamists failed to anticipate all of its consequences.

Yet despite the setbacks to Islamists (and especially Al-Qaeda), since 9/11, Islamist core assumptions about the United States remain intact. The idea that the United States is fundamentally hostile to Islam, and that U.S. vulnerabilities are greater than its strengths, remain articles of faith for Islamists. Like the United States, Islamists too present their struggle for the soul of the region as a generations-long conflict. In this conflict, it is not necessary to defeat the United States in each and every engagement, and Islamists are fully aware that this would be impossible. Islamists seek instead to provoke enough conflict with the United States to persuade Muslims that the United States is the enemy of Islam and to harm enough Americans or U.S. interests to dispel the aura of invincibility that should attach to history’s greatest hyper-power.

3. Between Word and Sword

Under which circumstances do Islamists choose persuasion, and under which do they choose violence? Are they provoked into violence by the perceived weakness of their adversaries, or by the use of violence against them? Is the culture of revenge and martyrdom an independent factor that drives overall strategy? How much cost-benefit analysis is invested in decisions about resort to force?

There is no Islamist movement or group that is avowedly pacifist, or that regards the resort to force as inherently un-Islamic. The conduct of the Prophet Muhammad, in this regard as in all other matters, is paradigmatic. He began his mission by issuing the call to Islam—an effort, by the force of his revelation and his powers of persuasion, to bring non-believers into the fold by preaching the word. However, the Prophet’s preaching often met stiff resistance, from members of his own tribe of Quraysh, from the oligarchs of Mecca, and from the Jews. Faced with this opposition, he withdrew to the neighboring city of Medina, where he mobilized his followers for battle, and then led the very first armies of Islam to the conquest of Mecca and further triumphs. He himself carried a sword. All of this is recorded in painstaking detail in the Muslim sources. A believing Muslim, and certainly an Islamist, cannot rule out the use of force for the propagation and defense of the faith, without turning away from Islam itself. Such battle, to spread and defend the truths of Islam, has always been known as *jihad*.

Nevertheless, the Prophet first sought to achieve his aims by persuasion. Only when thwarted did he resort to force of arms. It is this legacy of persuasion that is preserved in the concept of *da‘wa*, the “calling” to Islam. The concept of *da‘wa* complements that of *jihad*. The non-believers who are hostile to or ignorant of Islam must first be “called.” If they fail or refuse to answer the “call,” they are subject to *jihad*.

The ideal Islamist movement, if it is to pattern itself on this precedent, must therefore possess the means for *da‘wa* and *jihad*. In journalistic parlance, this is the distinction between the so-called “political” and “military” wings. But this distinction is a projection of Western political-military dichotomy upon a very different Islamist reality. In Islamist organizations, the very same persons are involved in both *da‘wa* and *jihad*. The so-called “spiritual leaders,” another term borrowed from the Western lexicon, model themselves on the Prophet’s precedent and regard themselves as having a double mission: as preachers of the word and as forgers, if not wielders, of the sword. At the lower levels of a movement, a functional distinction may be observed in the members of an Islamist movement, each operating in an area of specialization. But the higher a member of such a movement is placed, the more likely he is to be actively engaged in both *da‘wa* and *jihad*, simultaneously.

Osama bin Laden represents the archetype of this leader. He is (or was) responsible for formulating the ideological principles of Al-Qaeda, and for issuing missives of threat and persuasion through his videos, interviews, and statements. At the same time, he is the operational planner, immersed in the details of attacks, and giving orders of how and when to proceed.

Other Islamist leaders, from other movements, also aspire to conform to the paradigmatic model of the preacher-warrior. This may be witnessed symbolically in demonstrations by groups like Hamas and Hizbullah, in which the clerics, doctors, and engineers who lead these movements take guns into their hands and raise them aloft. Their followers understand such gestures perfectly: they are reassured that behind the scenes (and despite the denials made for Western consumption), the “spiritual” or “political” leaders are immersed in the conduct of *jihad*. There is also a symbolic rendition of the dual nature of these movements in their logos. Hizbullah’s official logo shows an extended fist gripping a rifle; the Hamas logo features crossed swords.

Islamist movements not only have no aversion to the use of force. They regard the pursuit of *jihad* as an act of worship. In the way Islamist leaders read and interpret Muslim sources, *jihad* in “the path of God” brings rewards, if not in this world, then in the next one. What has been called “the culture of *jihad*” comes down to the idea that it is not only good to kill for one’s cause—which is an imperative shared by all military organizations—but it is also good to *die* for it. Death in the cause is something to be achieved; it is an objective in its own right. This is what distinguishes an Islamist movement from its secular parallels. Islamists time and again have stated that the crucial difference between themselves and their adversaries is that non-believers “love life,” whereas the believers not only have no fear of death, but actually welcome it, as it constitutes meritorious “martyrdom in the path of God.”

Islamist tipping points

The legal and bureaucratic need to categorize Islamists and to determine which belong to terrorist groups and which belong to “political” movements has created a bewildering array of classifications. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates and spin-offs are deemed to be purely terrorist groups. Hamas and Hizbullah are regarded in the United States as terrorist organizations, but in some European (and all Arab) capitals, they are seen as “political” movements. Other groups and individuals are entered into different boxes. From the point of view of ideology and world-view, these classifications are meaningless. The pursuit of the pure Islamic state is shared by all of them.

The differences among them relate primarily to their present actions—that is, whether they employ violence, where they employ it, against whom they employ it, and at what scale. The differences here are profound. It would not be an exaggeration to say that all the Islamist

groups (as defined for the purposes of this study) are potential Al-Qaedas. (Indeed, a growing number of groups are becoming Al-Qaeda, emulating the violence employed by Osama bin Laden's original cadres.) But not every Islamist movement has become Al-Qaeda. What determines whether an Islamist group turns to violence?

Islamists are fully aware that the resort to violence comes at a price. Violence can prompt counter-violence, by Muslim regimes and foreign powers, and that counter-violence is potentially devastating. The counter-violence may take a toll on the organization that perpetrates it, and compel it to move all operations underground. Islamist movements that resort to violence may see their key leaders killed or arrested, and their operatives hunted down. Violence and counter-violence may also turn the populace in a Muslim country against the Islamists, if they feel that Islamist violence has brought death or suffering on innocent Muslims. In short, the resort to violence is never cost-free. This means that for Islamist movements, it is generally not a first resort.

In this regard, Islamists again model themselves on the Prophet Muhammad. He began his mission by *da'wa*—the “calling” issued to the non-believers. Only if the “calling” failed did he turn to violence—to the *jihad* to compel submission and obedience. Almost all Islamist movements have undergone an initial phase of *da'wa*, in which persuasion enjoyed primacy.

From that point, their paths have diverged. Some have resorted to violence in ever-expanding arenas. Such is the case with Al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad in Egypt, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria, the Palestinian Hamas, and some of the extreme jihadists now active in Saudi Arabia. (Many of these groups take their inspiration from the success of the Afghan *jihad* against the Soviets, in which constant escalation of violence eventually produced victory.) Other groups have resorted to violence for periods of time, and then have desisted, because they have achieved some interim goal. This is the case with Hizbullah. Still others have employed violence, found the price to be too high, and returned to the methods of *da'wa*. This has been the case for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan.

In each of these instances, a complex calculation has taken place, linked to the specific circumstances of each Islamist group. Islamists face very different realities across the region. Some operate in weak or failed states, where their ability to arm themselves as terrorist groups or territorial militias is virtually unlimited. (Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Sudan have been free zones for Islamists to take up arms; today, parts of Iraq offer the same attraction.) Other Islamists function in highly regulated states, in which they operate under conditions of constant surveillance by intelligence agencies and harassment by state security forces. Still others operate in the Muslim diaspora outside the Muslim world. The leeway Islamists enjoy in these settings varies greatly. In some instances, they operate freely and engage in illegal weapons procurement, smuggling, money

laundering, and terrorist operations. In other instances, they are on the defensive, subject to close surveillance, detention, punitive justice, and deportation.

It is difficult to generalize about the conditions in which Islamists resort to violence in these diverse settings. But the predominant evidence points to this conclusion: Islamists opt for violence not in response to political frustration, or in response to violence against them. Faced with an implacable foe who demonstrates resolve and commands loyalty, Islamists hesitate to use force, and emphasize their mission of *da'wa*.

It is in situations where Islamists sense weakness and lack of resolve in their adversaries that they opt for violence. Islamists do not rely on violence to turn a tide that is running against them. They do use it to ride a tide that seems to be already turning against their adversaries. The examples are legion:

- The one successful Islamist revolution, in Iran, took place against a ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah, who was afflicted by cancer and who had come to believe that his own divine protection had been rescinded. Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers sensed the ruler's weakness, which radiated throughout the military and guaranteed that the shah's forces would not fire on demonstrators. After this became apparent in a number of direct confrontations, the revolution became an unstoppable snowball of Islamist revolutionary violence.

- Islamists launched a *jihad* against the Algerian regime at a moment, in 1991, when that regime had lost much of its international legitimacy. Islamists could have appealed, with reasonable hope of success, to the conscience of the world after the regime annulled democratic elections. But Islamist strategists estimated that the annulment had cost the regime its vital international support, leaving it vulnerable to violent assault. At the time the Islamists declared *jihad*, they themselves were not being subjected to violent suppression. They chose violence against an enemy perceived to be weakened.

- Osama bin Laden repeatedly pointed to the hasty U.S. withdrawals from Beirut and Somalia, and the U.S. failure to deliver retribution against his own attacks in East Africa and Yemen, as evidence of weakness. The 9/11 attacks reflected a certain conviction that the United States had lost its will to defend its own interests in the Middle East, and could be intimidated into a total withdrawal.

- The Hamas suicide bombing campaign of 2002, in the midst of the second *intifada*, was launched after Hamas leaders assessed that Israeli morale had reached a nadir, and that carrying the violence into the heart of Israel would cause Israel to lose heart and withdraw in panic from the West Bank and Gaza.

- The Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004—Europe's 9/11—took place at a moment of heightened dissent about Spain's role in Iraq, and an already precipitate drop in the popularity of Spain's partnership with the United States in Iraq and the "war on terror." In a text analyzing the situa-

tion in Spain, circulated before the attack, a Saudi radical cleric explicitly identified the weakness of Spanish public support for the government's policies as an opportunity that could be exploited by an attack.

And more examples could be adduced.

The resort to violence has had unintended consequences for some of these Islamist movements (more on that below), but the decision "to go to *jihad*" was made in the expectation that the resort to violence would accelerate an underlying trend of retreat in the enemy camp.

In sum, there is an analysis of cost and benefit behind the choices made by Islamist movements. The costs are calculated, even if inaccurately (and usually with more precision in domestic than in international settings). *Jihad* is not the first resort, but the second one, after *da'wa* (although in many cases it tends to be a very close second).

But above all, violence is triggered by a sense that the enemy has lost morale or resolve or capacity, and is thus more vulnerable to a decisive blow. In history, other movements have used such vulnerabilities to press their case before world public opinion. They seek to delegitimize their adversaries, but Islamists have no faith in world public opinion, and no interest in showing the restraint that would be necessary to cultivate it. (The case of Hamas, through its suicide bombings, causing the evaporation of outside support for the second *intifada*, is a classic instance.) Their view of cultures locked in mortal struggle precludes reliance on the good will of (unbelieving) strangers. Instead, Islamists gravitate toward bold and violent action to crush an already weakened adversary—precisely the strategy glorified in Muslim sources as the key to the military success of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim armies.

Right moments

Do Islamist movements opt for violence to exploit specific circumstances? From time to time, analysts have speculated that attacks have been carefully timed to produce specific outcomes. The first presumed instance was the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, which had the effect of embarrassing the Carter administration as it entered an election year. This presumption was strengthened after Carter lost the election: the abductors released the American hostages on the very day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration.

The wave of Hamas suicide attacks in the spring of 1996, in the midst of an Israeli election campaign, was widely interpreted as a successful intervention in Israeli domestic politics. It turned the Israeli electorate against the "peace process" and its principle champion, candidate Shimon Peres—presumably a Hamas objective. Over the years, some Israeli commentators have claimed that a link exists between Islamist terror offensives and new peace initiatives. The Madrid train bombing of 2004, on the very eve of Spanish elections, seemed deliberately timed to affect the outcome. A document on an Islamist Internet site, posted three months ear-

lier, actually laid out a strategy for attacks that could influence Spanish elections and hasten a withdrawal of Spanish forces from Iraq.

However, it is possible that such timing is coincidental, especially in the more complex operations that require long-term planning. The 9/11 attacks involved extensive planning over several years, and there is no indication that the timing bore any relationship to any other event. Israeli analysts believe that the timing of Hamas operations is largely a function of opportunity: they occur at moments when resources come together, and Israel's guard is down.

Possible linkages need more research, but it cannot be ruled out that Islamists also seek to time specific operations for specific outcomes, even in the midst of long-term campaigns of *jihad* characterized by ongoing operations.

Revenge and apocalypse

It is sometimes argued that vengeance is a particularly salient feature of Muslim (and particularly Arab societies), and that the desire for revenge against injuries or humiliations can propel an Islamist movement into violence. There is no doubt that vengeance plays an important role in the lives of individuals who are mobilized for violent action by Islamist movements. The life-stories of suicide bombers and would-be suicide bombers are replete with litanies of personal grievance. And there is no doubt that Islamist movements invoke vengeance in their own public explanations of their deeds. Some groups, like Hamas, often claim that specific Hamas attacks are retribution for specific Israeli attacks against them. And after attacks against Islamist movements, some of their leaders are wont to swear revenge.

But vengeance and deterrence are two sides of the same coin. In societies where law is unevenly or erratically enforced, the threat of vengeance substitutes for the rule of law, and serves to *deter* violent acts. Mutual deterrence governs relations between Islamist movements and some of their adversaries, and in such relationships, Islamist leaders carefully control the impulse for individual revenge, in order to harness it to collective, higher purpose.

If there is a wild card in the Islamist resort to violence, it concerns a small minority of Islamists who believe that history has ended, and that we now live in eschatological time, i.e., the end of days. These millenarians believe that random violence and killing can serve as triggers for divine intervention, prompting God to bring about the sequence of events that constitutes the ultimate endgame. This kind of millenarianism has a history in Islam, as it does in all religious traditions, but it has played a fairly marginal role in contemporary Islamist movements. Nevertheless, there are signs that it is spreading, through the appearance of apocalyptic texts. The possibility that apocalyptic ideas might spread within a major Islamist movement must give pause, because it might produce random and

indiscriminate violence that would not be governed by any analysis of cost and benefit.

4. Targets for Every Season

When Islamists choose violence, what priorities guide their selection of targets? What military, legal, and moral considerations are invoked in the internal deliberations of Islamist groups over means and ends? How do Islamist movements draw and re-draw redlines (civilian targets, Muslims and non-Muslims, WMD)?

Once an Islamist group or movement has opted for violence, it faces the question of how most effectively and efficiently to use its resources. This is a question of targeting: the enemy is perceived to be vulnerable—in retreat or on the verge of retreat. How can that retreat best be expedited by the selection of the right targets?

No less important than efficiency is legality: which targets may be legitimately selected and struck, according to the principles of Islamic law, and particularly the law of war? (Note that the question is more one of legality, and less one of morality. For Islamists, morality is subjective and relative. Morality is also an avenue for the penetration of values that are foreign to Islam. The Shari‘a, in contrast, is fixed and unchanging, and therefore the more reliable guide to action.)

Finally, there is the question of means: which means are both effective and legal?

While Arab and Muslim governments are signatories to international treaties and conventions on war, their own specific historical experience did not inspire international norms. For Islamists, those norms are stigmatized precisely because they originate outside Islam. The Islamic law of war has its own logic, and while in some cases it may roughly approximate contemporary international norms, it rests on very different assumptions. The most fundamental difference is the distinction Islamic law draws between Muslims and non-Muslims. In virtually every respect, Islamic law provides for one set of norms for Muslims and another for non-Muslims, in everything from dress to taxation. The intent of the legislator—who is God himself—is to demonstrate the supremacy of Islam, by inscribing that supremacy in every detail of human conduct.

In warfare, this means that non-Muslims are generally denied the same protections afforded to Muslims. This does not mean that they are completely without protections, but these are conditional and contingent. They depend on the willingness of the non-Muslim party in a conflict to submit to the Muslim party in a timely manner. Absent that submission, the protections of non-Muslims may vanish altogether, as they did on 9/11. For Islamist groups and movements, “legitimate targets” are defined by religious, historical, and legal traditions that are at general variance with those of the West. The same is true of “legitimate means.”

The asymmetry of power between Islamist groups and their powerful adversaries reinforces this difference. Islamists confront the world’s

greatest power, many additional powers, and hardened regimes. International definitions of terrorism, civilians, and non-combatants tend to disable non-state actors, denying legitimacy to the limited kinds of sub-state capabilities they can muster on the “battlefield.” For this reason, Islamist thinkers and leaders expend great efforts in articulating an alternative code, and inculcating it among their followers. Its basic presupposition is that Muslims need not and should not play by rules dictated by non-Muslims. (This is a variation of the idea, so essential to all guerrilla warfare and terrorism, that the weak need not play by the rules of the strong.) The resulting corpus of statements, fatwas, edicts, and rulings constitutes an alternative code of warfare. Some of it justifies conventional “resistance.” Much of it justifies terrorism, and on its furthest fringes, attacks such as 9/11 and potential use of weapons of mass destruction.

In the comparatively short history of Islamist groups and movements, the overall trend is one of inclusion of many more “soft targets” in the repertoire of “legitimate targets,” and the legitimization of ever-more destructive means. Islamist movements and groups ultimately seek the kind of power exercised by states, by unseating their rulers. Islamists are therefore quick to adopt techniques that might give them comparable “firepower,” despite the more limited resources they command. But since they cannot possibly achieve symmetry in this way, or consistently destroy “hard targets,” they are drawn inexorably to “soft targets” that are more numerous and less secured.

Near enemy, far enemy

Beyond this, it is difficult to generalize about Islamist decision-making on targets, because Islamist movements and groups operate in a wide variety of environments. Some contend with occupying (non-Muslim) foreign forces. (This was the case in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and it is the case today in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza and in Iraq.) Other Islamists are locked in violent conflict with Muslim regimes. (Saudi Arabia is the prime example today.) Al-Qaeda and its clones see themselves as the vanguard of a global *jihad*, and operate across any border they can penetrate.

Because all Islamist groups and movements see the enemy as multifaceted—as a conspiratorial alliance of global forces hostile to Islam—all of them face the same question of the scale of their *jihad*. There is a near enemy, and there is a far enemy—near and far manifestations of the same implacable foe. The near enemy provides relatively close and accessible targets. The far enemy is powerful but distant, and targeting it requires a higher level of organization and capabilities. The leaders of most Islamist groups and movements preach that Muslims face an integrated global conspiracy, but they direct the violence of followers against the near enemy—the local incarnation of the global conspiracy.

The result is a functional division of Islamist *jihad* into component parts. Egypt’s Islamic Jihad, when it entered a *jihad* mode in the 1990s,

chose targets with the aim of undermining the Egyptian regime. Hamas and Hizbullah have focused on Israeli targets. These groups enjoy a relative advantage in their own zone of operation, and they seek to maximize it by local targeting.

This has led some analysts to describe the motive of such groups as nationalism in an Islamist form (or even an Islamist guise). In this interpretation, Hamas is simply an Islamized form of Palestinian nationalism, and shares more in common with secular Palestinian nationalism than with global Islamism. This is to mistake a functional division of labor for an ideological preference. All of the Sunni Islamist groups are branches or spin-offs of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has always had a strong pan-Islamic element. Even today, a group like Hamas looks abroad to outside Islamist scholars to provide rationales for its violence.

And some “national” Islamists do maintain a capability to operate internationally. The Egyptian Islamic Jihad struck at Egyptian targets in Africa and Asia, including a bombing of an Egyptian embassy in Pakistan and an assassination attempt against Egyptian president Husni Mubarak in Ethiopia. In the 1980s, Hizbullah operated internationally against targets selected in consultation with its Iranian patrons, bombing U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait and trains in France. (These attacks were meant to deter supporters of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war.) Even Islamists who target the near enemy seek to develop the capability to strike against the far one, in the same way that a conventional force is complemented by unconventional force, even if the latter is kept in reserve for exceptional circumstances.

A localized movement is most likely to go international under two sets of circumstances. First, it may be called upon to contribute to a collective Islamist effort. Hizbullah did this on behalf of Iran in its war with Iraq in the 1980s, and Sunni movements sent massive human and material resources to Afghanistan in the 1980s, to contribute to the *jihad* against the Soviet occupation. Second, it may act across borders when it has exhausted its local options. For example, when Israel delivered particularly painful blows to Hizbullah in the early 1990s, assassinating its secretary-general and bombing its training bases in Lebanon, Hizbullah collaborated with Iran to destroy an Israeli embassy and a Jewish communal building in Argentina. (These were the first two buildings brought down by Islamists in the Western Hemisphere—a precursor to 9/11.)

But Hizbullah, although it has “global reach,” strikes targets abroad only in exceptional circumstances, even though it maintains the capability of doing so at any time. In most phases of its history, it has preferred to strike at the near enemy—in the past, against Israel’s forces in Lebanon (and, to some extent, the civilian population in northern Israel), and today against Israeli forces along the Lebanese-Israeli border. A complex set of constraints and deterrent relationships govern Hizbullah’s posture toward Israel, which limit the movement’s targeting in space and scope.

Hamas is another case of a movement with potential global reach which has limited its targeting to a local setting (Israel and the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza). Because the Palestinians, including Islamists, are scattered across a wide diaspora, and because that diaspora provides the “inside” Islamists with funds and logistical support, Hamas has been careful to confine targeting to the “inside.” There are ample Israeli (and Jewish) targets around the world, and Hamas could reach some of them. But such operations would prompt an ever-widening crackdown on the international support network of Hamas. The price of overseas targeting would be prohibitive, and so Hamas has not followed the precedent of the secular Palestinian terrorists of the 1970s, who attacked Israeli targets worldwide. Hamas spokesmen recently threatened to do so after Israel assassinated two of its leaders in succession in 2004, but they quickly rescinded that threat. For the Hamas, the international arena is where it forages for resources, not where it wages *jihād*.

Al-Qaeda and its clones are unique, having built the capabilities necessary to reach the far enemy. These capabilities were developed in the course of the *jihād* in Afghanistan against the Soviets—an international Islamist effort that required a logistical structure on a region-wide scale, and which benefited at various stages from the support of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. The international composition of the *jihād* made it relatively easy to translate Al-Qaeda into a global network. In the 1990s, many veterans of the Afghan *jihād* returned to their countries of origin, with the objective of building localized movements and targeting Arab regimes. But they lacked a social base, and the regimes acted decisively against them, putting the veterans to flight. Osama bin Laden believed that the attempt to confront Arab regimes directly was destined to fail, and that targeting the far enemy—the United States—would yield more immediate and tangible results.

Al-Qaeda has traveled the farthest distance to strike Islam’s enemies. While some Islamists have criticized the tactical choices made by Al-Qaeda in targeting (e.g., the focus on civilian targets), the overall strategy of attacking the far enemy in tandem with the operations of local movements has not been subjected to any trenchant Islamist critique.

Hard and soft targets

While Islamists have a reputation for targeting civilians in their operations, this is not an unequivocal preference. Nearly all Islamist movements that have chosen violence have made great efforts to strike at military targets, precisely because of their prestige as “hard targets,” and their status as direct arms of the United States, Israel, and Arab regimes. The Egyptian and Syrian jihad groups of the late 1970s struck at Egyptian and Syrian military academies and personnel. The *jihād* against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s prided itself on its ability to deliver painful blows to the Soviet military. Hizbullah’s “self-martyrdom” operations in the 1980s in Lebanon were directed against U.S. Marines and French para-

troopers in Beirut, and Israeli forces. Even Osama bin Laden sought to strike military targets, such as U.S. forces in Somalia, the U.S.S. Cole off the coast of Yemen, and the Pentagon on 9/11. The successful destruction of a military target by a sub-state Islamist group is a special source of pride, because it most thoroughly overturns the perceived asymmetry of power.

From a very early date, however, Islamist groups extended the range of “legitimate targets” in two directions. First, in their contest with regimes, they legitimized the assassination of political leaders. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, considered a “mainstream” movement, assassinated a prime minister in 1949, and attempted to assassinate Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1954. An Egyptian Islamist group assassinated his successor, Anwar Sadat, in 1981, and came close to assassinating Sadat’s successor, Husni Mubarak, in 1995. This has been complemented by assassinations and assassination attempts against secularizing intellectuals, and in the affair of Salman Rushdie, a state-sanctioned Islamist call to all Muslims to assassinate an author. In a political culture where assassination does not give rise to revulsion, the Islamists have not been exceptions.

Second, in targeting foreigners, Islamists have treated foreign embassies and diplomatic personnel as virtual extensions of military targets, since they are deemed to house “spies.” Ayatollah Khomeini’s followers, in holding U.S. diplomats in Tehran hostage for 444 days in 1980-81, set the precedent. Hizbullah’s operatives blew up the U.S. embassy in Beirut in 1983 and its annex in 1984. They also bombed the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait in 1983. Iran and Hizbullah plotted the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992. Egyptian jihadists destroyed the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad in 1995. Al-Qaeda bombed two U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998, and Islamists bombed the British consulate in Istanbul in 2003. Individual diplomats have been abducted or killed; numerous other plots have been foiled. The rationale is always the same; as Osama bin Laden explained, “The U.S. embassy [in Nairobi] has the largest CIA station in East Africa.” The systematic undermining of the protections normally afforded to foreign diplomatic missions in the Middle East has been due to the rhetoric and actions of Islamists over the last twenty-five years.

The last ten years have witnessed the erosion of some of the last self-limitations on *jihād*: those relating to innocent civilians, both foreign and Muslim. The ideological dehumanization of foreigners has accelerated dramatically among Islamist thinkers, who portray the enemy not as a government and its policy but as a culture and its supporting society. The rationale is that all civilians indirectly or directly support their governments’ policies and militaries, and are therefore complicit. Such rationales underpinned the abduction of foreign nationals by Hizbullah and other groups in Lebanon. In Egypt, Islamist groups targeted foreign tourists, most famously in the Luxor massacre in 1997.

Attacking civilians became the preferred method of the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad, especially after 1996, and again during the second intifada, from 2000 to the present. Palestinian terrorism of the 1970s had also targeted Israeli civilians (as well as international aviation). But Palestinian Islamists expanded the practice into a systematic campaign. Over the past four years, they have released a human wave of “self-martyrs”—some 700 persons. Nearly all of them *bypassed* Israeli military personnel in order to target non-combatants. In the name of greater efficiency—i.e., doubling the potential pool of bombers and avoiding detection—Palestinian Islamists have even recruited women to carry out attacks. The leading Sunni clerics esteemed by Hamas (most famously, the television Islamist Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi) have openly endorsed the targeting of Israeli civilians and the deployment of women attackers—“soft weapons” for “soft targets.”

It could be claimed that Islamists, unable to wreak serious damage on “hard targets,” have resorted to “soft targets” as a matter of necessity. If so, it is Al-Qaeda that has made a virtue of necessity, completing the rationales to justify mass and indiscriminate killing of unbelievers. From Manhattan to Bali to Madrid, Al-Qaeda and the groups inspired by it have rejected the very idea of protected non-combatants and “innocent civilians” among non-Muslims. “The American people should remember,” said Osama bin Laden, “that they pay taxes to their government, they elect their president, their government manufactures arms and gives them to Israel.” In any case, 9/11 was “not targeted at women and children.” Not only does Al-Qaeda believe Muslims to be engaged in total war against unbelief, but they believe that *jihad* by definition is a form of total warfare, and that it was waged as such by the Prophet Muhammad.

In the case of Al-Qaeda and its imitators, even *Muslim* non-combatants and civilians are possible targets—a major erosion of a crucial taboo. If the prime feature of the Islamic law of war is its principled distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, in which the former enjoy protections denied to the latter, then many of the acts of Al-Qaeda may be said to erase even this distinction. Al-Qaeda and extreme Wahhabism have always nurtured a strong hostility to Shi‘ite Muslims, who are cast as deviants, and Shi‘ite Muslims have been occasional targets of such groups. Some of the devastating bombings against Shi‘ites in Iraq have been drawn from this well of hatred. But even Sunni Muslim civilians have been either targeted by these groups, or killed in large numbers as bystanders during attacks on foreign or non-Muslim targets. Islamist planners were indifferent to the hundreds of Africans (including Muslims) killed when they bombed two U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998, or the many Muslim Turks killed in attacks against two Istanbul synagogues in 2003. The two attacks in Riyadh in 2003 also killed Muslims.

It is indisputable that the circle of “legitimate targets” has been dramatically enlarged. Not all Islamists have welcomed every enlargement. For example, television Islamist Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi has

condemned 9/11 and the Bali bombings. Yet he has also endorsed Palestinian “self-martyrdom” operations and the use of women in them. As various Islamists expand the range of “legitimate targets,” each in his preferred direction, the sum of their efforts is to erode all limits, creating a culture in which any non-Muslim, or indeed any non-Islamist, is a potential enemy and therefore a potential target. For some time now, the Arab-Muslim world has been retreating from its past moral, ethical, and legal engagement with the West. The emergence of Al-Qaeda is both a symptom and a cause of the Arab-Muslim retreat from Islam’s very own moral, ethical, and legal legacy. It is not just that every form of targeting is evolving inexorably toward terrorism; it is that this evolution can always find some justification from public figures, intellectuals, and spiritual leaders. People of this caliber, who today act in Western societies as brakes on the exercise of the almost limitless power the West commands, in Muslim societies have advocated or sanctioned the erasing of one red line after another.

The appeal of “soft targets” has been explained as a strategic choice. Such targets are difficult to protect, and a successful attack against one can have the same overall effect as an attack on a “hard target.” It does so by discouraging investment, trade, and tourism, since observers are led to conclude that the “war on terror” cannot be won in the targeted country. All this is undoubtedly true, but it was also true in the past, when “soft targets,” were not struck so systematically. The difference is that Islamist thinkers have generated convincing rationales that absolve the perpetrators of all guilt and shame for such acts. Indeed, they argue that to feel such guilt and shame is itself a sign of moral debasement, surrendering to the norms and values of unbelievers.

By all means

Parallel to the legitimizing of more diverse targets, there has been a widening of means. Islamist groups have demonstrated a constant progression, from the use of limited means for symbolic violence, to the deployment of advanced means for mass destructive violence.

The crucial transformation in this progression has been the “self-martyr,” i.e. the suicide attacker. The willingness of an operative to go deliberately to his or her death multiplies the effect of the operation. The glorification of the “self-martyr” in the culture of *jihad*, as articulated by Islamist clerics and thinkers, is a collective effort to maximize Islamist access to a military resource: a large pool of willing suicide attackers.

The wedding of the “self-martyr” to the car bomb, the explosives belt, and the airliner has made it possible for Islamist groups to strike at a wider range of targets with more destructive force. This innovation required a conceptual breakthrough, which took place in Lebanon in the early 1980s. At that time, Shi‘ite jurists conducted a debate over whether such acts constituted suicide, which is expressly forbidden in Islam. Ultimately they concluded that “self-martyrdom operations” were not suicide, provided they were subject to careful regulation by Islamic legal authorities.

Hizbullah unleashed a succession of such attacks, including the October 1983 bombing that killed 241 U.S. Marines in Beirut.

Although the operations were manifestly successful, Shi'ite jurists remained concerned by the fact that individual Muslims (the bombers) were going knowingly to their deaths. They were prepared to license such operations only in cases where planners guaranteed that the attacks would inflict massive enemy casualties. In the later 1980s, it became difficult to assure success because of counter-measures, and several operations ended only in the death of the "self-martyr." Clerics began to withhold their consent, and by the 1990s, the hero in Hizbullah had become the guerrilla fighter, not the suicide bomber.

To maximize the resource of the "self-martyrs," such reservations had to be discarded. This was easiest in Islamist groups and movements that were not subject, on a day-to-day basis, to rigorous Islamic legal authority. Hamas is one such movement: its leaders are laymen, not clerics. Al-Qaeda also interprets Islamic law without regular recourse to Islamic jurists, and they saw "self-martyrdom" as effective and cost-effective. As Al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, once explained: "martyrdom operations are the most successful way of inflicting damage against the opponent and the least costly to the mujahideen in terms of casualties."

Freed from Hizbullah's constraints, Hamas and Al-Qaeda have produced new modifications. Hamas invented the "assembly line" approach to "self-martyrs," deploying them in a "human wave" without case-by-case legal vetting. Al-Qaeda perfected "self-martyrdom" by groups, in coordinated, simultaneous attacks. (This had some precedent in the operations of Hizbullah: the attack against the U.S. Marines in Beirut in 1983 was coordinated with a simultaneous attack against French forces. But double and triple attacks did not become a hallmark of Hizbullah, as they have become for Al-Qaeda.)

Al-Qaeda has also taken the lead in using "self-martyrs" in innovative combinations with especially destructive means. The use of civilian airliners on 9/11, devastating as it proved to be, is unlikely to be the final point in this evolution. When Al-Qaeda was based in Afghanistan, it demonstrated a clear interest in developing chemical weapons. Information on such weapons figured in Al-Qaeda operations manuals, although not prominently. More recently, Islamists in London and Rome have been arrested while in possession of ricin or other toxins.

More significantly for the longer term, a few Islamist thinkers are providing preliminary rationales justifying the use of WMD. A Saudi cleric affiliated with Al-Qaeda, Sheikh Nasir al-Fahd, made the most systematic justification for the use of WMDs against the United States:

The attack against [the U.S.] by WMD is accepted, since God said: "If you are attacked you should attack your aggressor by identical force." Whoever looks at the American aggression against the

Muslims and their lands in recent decades concludes that it is permissible... They have killed about ten million Muslims, and destroyed countless lands... If they would be bombed in a way that would kill ten million of them and destroy their lands—it is obviously permitted, with no need for evidence.

It may well be that for now, the careful placement of “self-martyrs” is more likely to produce “mass destruction” than the use of chemical or biological agents. But given the rapidity with which Islamists have legitimized one more destructive means after another, they do not regard the resort to WMD as violating a grave taboo. In any case, the WMD taboo is a product of Western historical experience, and it is a factor in the Middle East only to the extent that the West—and above all the United States—enforces it. Absent that enforcement, there is no intrinsic impediment to Islamist acquisition and use of such weapons.

New targets, means, and rationales: the recent history of Islamist groups is one of constant evolution, the sum of which represent an expanded capability and a readiness to use it. Debate among Islamists does take place, and some clerics and thinkers have warned against the unfettered proliferation that has put Islamists at the top of terrorism lists. But once Islamists have opted for violence, red lines are erased with growing frequency, and the arguments for their maintenance grow weaker. The strongest countervailing force to this trend is not internal. It comes from without.

5. Islamist Intelligence

How do Islamists collect and process information about their perceived enemies? What sources do they regard as credible? What capabilities of their adversaries do they think are important enough to measure and monitor? Which biases affect the ways they interpret information? How do those biases shape strategy?

One of the most astonishing aspects of 9/11 was the ease with which the Islamist terrorists moved into the United States, received flight training, got driver's licenses and credit cards, rented apartments, transferred funds, acquired flight tickets, and breezed through airports. These people knew the vulnerabilities, the loopholes, and the unlocked doors of contemporary America, and so did their planners and paymasters. Khaled Sheikh Muhammad, the mastermind of 9/11, learned the ins and outs of America while an engineering student at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in the 1980s. Easy intimacy with the United States, and the West more generally, characterized several key members of the plot.

Prior to 9/11, the most astonishing Islamist success had occurred almost exactly twenty years earlier, on October 6, 1981. On that day, a group of Islamists recruited from within the Egyptian military participated in a military parade marking seven years to Egypt's October war with Israel. As they passed the reviewing stand, they stormed it, shooting to death the president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat. The assassins included Egyptian army officers, who managed to recruit followers, install themselves in the parade, and smuggle in ammunition, all without detection. They knew the culture of the Egyptian military—its laxity in matters of detail, its gaps in discipline, and above all the false sense of invincibility that led Sadat, that day, to leave his bulletproof vest at home.

Both 9/11 and the Sadat assassination were Islamist intelligence coups. They also demonstrated the range of Islamist capabilities. The perceived enemies of the Islamists fall largely into two categories: Muslim-Arab regimes that patrol closed societies; and Western or Western-style democracies that are the products of open societies. Islamists who are embedded in closed societies are familiar with the strengths and vulnerabilities of ruling regimes. Islamists admitted to the West, and who benefit from its many freedoms, are just as familiar with the ins and outs of open societies. Many Islamist plans and plots have been detected and foiled by the regimes and democracies targeted by Islamists. But there is always the prospect that the next plan might succeed, and that it is being implemented at this very moment, based on precise intelligence. All who have confronted Islamist opponents have learned never to underestimate their ability to collect, assess, and operationalize intelligence.

It is not surprising that Islamists should know much of their own societies. It is surprising that they know so much about the West, and the United States. How did they build this capability? How accurate have their assessments been? And has the record really been all that impressive? What exactly are the limits of their knowledge?

Credible sources

From the very outset, the most credible sources for Islamists have been their returnees from the belly of the beast: Muslims who have lived in the West and experienced it first-hand.

The pioneer was Sayyid Qutb, the early Islamist ideologue, who spent two formative years in the United States, beginning in 1948. It was precisely his experience that gave his withering critique of America its credibility. Many of his successors as Islamist thinkers have had a great deal of experience in the West, mastering its languages and learning something of its philosophies. Sudan's Hasan al-Turabi, who for a time was the country's Islamist *eminence grise*, did a doctorate in law at the Sorbonne in Paris from 1959 to 1964. Rashid Ghannushi, the (exiled) former leader of the main Tunisian Islamist party, was studying philosophy at the Sorbonne at the time of the 1968 student uprising. On the level of ideologues, there is no shortage of Islamist thinkers who purport to know the West—its strengths and vulnerabilities—from the inside.

The strongest influence on these thinkers has been the critique of the West made by the West's own social critics. Not only can Islamist thinkers invoke personal experience; they can cite proofs, chapter and verse, from the criticisms of the West made within the West itself. (This is more the case for Muslim Brotherhood-vintage Islamists. In Al-Qaeda, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and other affiliates, all sourcing is from the Qur'an.) Open societies speak a great deal about their own weakness and flaws. Islamists are attuned to this endless chatter, which they process through their own agencies of thought.

Today there is also a very substantial Muslim presence across Europe and the Americas. In every such community—sometimes at its center, sometimes on its margins—are Islamist activists. They serve as a source of credible information and intelligence about the politics of their host countries. It is here that Islamists have also created an international cyber-community, employing the Internet to compensate for the difficulties of actual movement across frontiers.

In some cases, foreign-based Islamist activists have turned into operative terror cells, buried deep in Western capitals. The entourage surrounding the blind sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman, which made the first attempt to destroy the World Trade Center in 1993, is exemplary of this kind of cell. Some of these cells have even recruited Western converts into their ranks. Paradoxically, Islamist groups and movements can call on people with more cross-cultural tools, including life experience and languages, than many Western intelligence agencies.

Skewed priorities

Like most entities that gather intelligence, Islamists are swamped with information. But, like most intelligence consumers, their difficulties begin at the level of interpretation, where biases and prejudices filter data into predetermined categories. It is here that Islamists have made major strategic errors of assessment, as disastrous as their successful tactical operations on Sadat's last day and on 9/11.

The problem is that while Islamists are eager to know about the weaknesses of their enemies, they invest their limited resources in measuring and monitoring those elements that they themselves regard as crucial to power. As mentioned earlier, Islamists regard power as an outcome of faith. For this reason, there are crucial components of their enemies' power that they ignore.

Their bias—Muslims are elevated spiritual beings; non-Muslim Westerners are decadent and corrupt—is a filter that prevents Islamists from fully understanding and appreciating the dynamo at the heart of Western civilization. Islamists, preoccupied with the discovery of the weaknesses and flaws of the West, often fail to identify its strengths. Indeed, they regard its greatest strengths—freedom, pluralism, tolerance, secularism, and individualism—as weaknesses. For Islamists, the success of God's enemies in amassing great power is therefore an anomaly without explanation, except as a test of the Muslims devised by God. A few of them have a cursory acquaintance with the spiritual and philosophical underpinnings of the West, but the vast majority do not have an understanding that goes beyond the superficial observations on American life made by Sayyid Qutb. Islamists are largely incapable of understanding how pluralistic societies achieve a high degree of solidarity, since their basic presumptions postulate that such societies must be in a perpetual state of dissolution. (In this respect, the United States and Israel, as countries of immigrants, are particularly opaque to Islamist thinkers.)

Perhaps the most significant omission in the Islamist understanding of their foreign opponents is economics. Islamist thought is largely innocent of economic thinking (there is a theory of "Islamic economics," but it is weak and unsystematic). Nor do Islamists show any great interest in the economic systems of their enemies. Some Islamists have been quite adept at burrowing into the West, to exploit its free markets and capital flows in order to finance their own operations. (This is the Islamist version of the old Leninist idea that the capitalist world will sell its enemies the rope with which to hang it.) And some Islamist attacks have had economic implications, such as the attack on the World Trade Center, a symbol of American global economic primacy, or the killing of tourists in Egypt in the 1990s, which cut off a major source of foreign earnings for the Egyptian economy. Islamist attacks in Israel have also stemmed the flow of tourists and foreign investment, with damaging consequences for Israel's economy.

An Algerian recruit to Afghanistan once testified that Al-Qaeda trainees in Afghanistan were trained to “blow up infrastructure such as electric plants, airports, railroads, large corporations, and gas installations.” When U.S. bombs fell on Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden called on Muslims to launch “further strikes” against “the key pillars of the U.S. economy.” But there is little evidence that Islamist movements actually collect economic information about their enemies, or rely upon it in planning their tactical operations or overall strategy. Nor have they targeted purely economic infrastructure. Their actions have had economic consequences, but they are not based on economic forethought.

The sum effect of Islamist bias is this: Islamists tend to underestimate the underlying power base and collective resolve of their foreign adversaries. They eagerly embrace evidence of dissent in the ranks of their enemies (which they assiduously cull from the Western media), and filter out contrary evidence as disinformation that has been deliberately disseminated so as to mislead and demoralize them. Such underestimation has led them to act prematurely and overplay their hands. Tactical surprises such as 9/11, even when carefully coordinated in “phase one,” lack a carefully planned “phase two.” (Such was the case in the Sadat assassination as well. Ayman al-Zawahiri called the abortive uprising in Upper Egypt that followed the assassination “poorly planned,” since it “disregarded any figures about the enemy’s strength and materiel.”) It is as though the one single act was expected to trigger a favorable chain reaction. When their enemies do rally, rather than retreat, Islamists are often surprised at the force of the reaction, for which they have rarely made adequate preparations.

Islamists vs. armies

While Islamists can be effective in gathering and processing the intelligence needed for low-intensity warfare and terrorism, their opponents often strike back with the overwhelming force of conventional means. This is what Arab regimes and foreign powers do best, and they do so in an effort to shift the battle back to advantageous terrain. On that terrain, Islamists have a mixed record.

Generally speaking, Islamists do not measure and monitor the conventional military capabilities of their adversaries, which they would rather elude than confront. This unwillingness to engage, conceptually, with the meaning of the West’s constant advances in conventional warfare has worked to the detriment of Islamists in more than one setting. “We believe that America is weaker than Russia,” Osama bin Laden told a journalist in 1998, “and from what we heard from our brothers who waged *ji-had* in Somalia, they found to their greatest surprise the weakness, frailty, and cowardliness of the American soldier.” This assessment exempted Al-Qaeda from making its own appraisal of U.S. capabilities (although these would also have been placed in doubt by the ineffectual U.S. response to the East African embassy bombings earlier in 1998, when cruise missiles were fired at Al-Qaeda training bases to no effect).

After 9/11, Al-Qaeda and its Taliban partners were subjected, for the first time, to the entire range of U.S. conventional military capabilities, which far exceeded anything deployed by the Soviet Union in its long years in Afghanistan. A month into the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden desperately claimed that well-dug trenches, properly spaced, could hold the Taliban lines: “It is possible to absorb these attacks through wide defensive lines... In this way, years will pass and America—God willing—will not be able to break the lines of the mujahideen.” As late as December, bin Laden claimed that the fighting—by now, a lightning U.S. victory—had “clearly revealed the extent of the powerlessness of the U.S. government, the extent of U.S. weakness, and the fragility of the U.S. soldier.” This remained an article of blind faith, beyond all reassessment. The failure of Al-Qaeda to monitor, let alone accurately estimate, U.S. military capabilities proved devastating to the organization in Afghanistan and to its Taliban hosts.

However, in a few settings, Islamists have taken accurate measure of the conventional military force of their enemies. The Afghan *jihad* against the Soviets did precisely that, identifying the weaknesses of Soviet forces, the fissures in the relations between the Soviets and their Afghan clients, and diminishing Soviet morale. But the Afghan *jihad* also benefited from intelligence supplied by the United States and Pakistan.

Another Islamist movement, Hizbullah, bested a major military force, Israel, in the course of a sustained guerrilla war. The effort required the construction of an extensive intelligence apparatus, which accurately mapped the routine of Israeli forces, Israel’s relations with its Lebanese clients, and changes in civil-military relations within Israel. Hizbullah’s military intelligence on Israel was arguably equal to that of several Arab states. But this was due in large part to its close cooperation with Iranian and Syrian intelligence.

Faced with a foreign occupying force, Islamists seem capable of shifting their resources effectively into collecting and processing intelligence on conventional enemy forces, and restructuring themselves into guerrilla formations. But in every successful case, they have enjoyed the benefit of state support—that is, they have formed alliances with states, which possess higher-level systems for collection and processing of intelligence. They have essentially recruited states to their cause.

Absent that support, their record is one of failure. In the 1990s, Algerian Islamists launched a *jihad* against the regime, in the belief that it had been weakened significantly by its decision to nullify free elections. That decision, so the Islamists believed, had cost the regime the support of France and the West; in a head-to-head confrontation, the Islamists would prevail. The Islamists did not have the intelligence support of any state. In the resulting civil war, the regime’s security services enjoyed a systemic superiority in intelligence gathering and processing, to the point where it successfully manipulated the Islamists, setting faction against faction and conducting psychological operations that destroyed public sympathy for

Islamism. The Algerian war ended in 100,000 deaths, but the regime prevailed, delivering Islamism a significant defeat.

Another example is that of the Palestinian Hamas during the second *intifada*. Hamas did not initiate the *intifada*, but it attempted to usurp the place of primacy in it, through its “self-martyrdom” operations. But while it enjoyed widespread sympathy in the Arab-Islamic world, and some limited logistical support from Iran, it did not benefit from continuous intelligence cooperation from any state. The reason: the continuing legitimacy of Yasir Arafat prevented states from entering a close liaison with Hamas. While Hamas proved capable of launching several sporadic terror campaigns within Israel, Israel’s conventional military forces took back the initiative in the spring of 2002 by reoccupying much of the West Bank and stepping up incursions into Gaza. The reoccupation reestablished Israel’s superiority in intelligence collection, and within two years it had decimated the operational and leadership ranks of Hamas, including two rapid-succession assassinations of the movement’s top leaders. These have yet to be “avenged.”

In sum, Islamist groups and movements are not a match for states in the realm of intelligence-based warfare, unless they themselves are allied to or supported by states. An Islamist group can launch a terror campaign without state support, but its impact will be uneven and its progression will be sporadic. For Islamists to wrest territory from a regime or foreign power, they need a state partner or state sponsor. It is precisely the dearth of such states that explains why Islamists have not succeeded in replicating the Iranian revolution over the last quarter of a century, with the exception of Afghanistan, which they promptly lost after miscalculating the impact of 9/11. Islamists are capable of mimicking behavior that requires integration of borrowed tactics and tradecraft. But because they are locked into a position of total disdain for their enemies, they have no dynamic strategy, only an unchanging belief system. Islamists have closed parts of their minds to the flow of information. This remains their greatest weakness.

6. Islamist Metrics for Success

What measures do Islamists use to determine whether they have succeeded or failed? How do they understand events like 9/11 and regime change (Afghanistan, Iraq)? What events persuade them that they are winning or losing?

The question of whether Islamism is on the rise or the wane is disputed among experts. Before 9/11, some argued that the failure of Islamists to seize power beyond Iran signaled their decline. They had been defeated in every arena. Others argued that decline was too strong a word, since Islamists had still managed to achieve a degree of cultural hegemony, despite their political checkmate. Still others pointed to Al-Qaeda and terrorism, arguing that Islamism was neither in decline nor checkmated. The violence reflected a new confidence and dynamism. The 9/11 attacks strengthened this last interpretation, without eliminating the others. (“Decline” theorists, most of them French, even argued that 9/11 was itself the outcome of decline—a last gasp by Islamists who otherwise had been completely thwarted. “The attack on the United States was a desperate symbol of the isolation, fragmentation, and decline of the Islamist movement, not a sign of its strength and irrepressible might,” wrote one of them.)

Lost in this debate are the views of the Islamists themselves, and with good reason. In the open societies of the West, there is a constant and noisy debate over whether “we”—Americans, Europeans, the West—are winning or losing. In the “war on terror” and Iraq, the question is the subject of heated contention. Among Islamists, evidence for a parallel debate is slim. Islamist thinkers and leaders are content to issue reassurances that time is on their side, and that all is going precisely according to plan, which is God’s plan. Islamist movements range between authoritarian and totalitarian in their structures, and they leave little room for open questioning. When Islamists believe events are running in their favor, or even in situations of stalemate, they issue triumphalist statements, much like Arab regimes. When the tide first turns against them, they either deny it or draw silent.

Control the state

If there is one shared Islamist metric of success, it is this: acquisition of power. Islamists are unquestionably interested in establishing their cultural primacy, and they undoubtedly wish to see society embrace Islamic norms. But Islamism seeks to be much more than a cultural or social movement. Its basic principle is the amalgam of Islam and politics—that is, it is first and foremost a political cause. Islam, so the Islamists believe, is not merely a religion, in the Western sense of a system of belief in God. It possesses an immutable law revealed by God, dealing with every aspect

of life; and it is an ideology, a complete system of belief about the organization of the state and the world. This law and ideology can only be implemented through the establishment of a truly Islamic state, under the sovereignty of God.

Only the state has the material means and the coercive force to Islamize itself and society. Islamism, therefore, cannot remain content to function as a social movement. To fulfill its destiny, it must capture the state and rule. From the very beginnings of Islamism, political power has been the obsession of every Islamist thinker, leader, and movement. The Al-Qaeda training manual is unequivocal: the “main mission” of the *jihad* is “the overthrow of the godless regimes and their replacement with an Islamic regime.”

Islamists have been most optimistic at those moments in the past twenty-five years when their own empowerment seemed imminent. The first of these moments accompanied and immediately followed the Iranian revolution. Islamist movements rushed to emulate the success of the Ayatollah Khomeini. The seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by zealots, the Sadat assassination, the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria—all of these were evidence for the wave of optimism that swept Islamist movements. All of their assaults were turned back by resolute regimes, except for the Iranian-backed Hizbullah, which managed to implant itself in Lebanon because it served Syrian interests.

The next moment attended the triumph of the *jihad* in Afghanistan. With an Islamist-style state established in Afghanistan, and Arab regimes under pressure to liberalize after the Soviet collapse, Islamists of all stripes believed their moment had come. In Algeria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, they boldly predicted triumph, and their optimism led them to act precipitously once more, in acts of violence. Once again, the regimes turned them back, effectively deploying security forces to crush Islamists and gearing up propaganda machines to discredit them. By the year 2000, some Islamists began to propose cease-fires with regimes to prevent the decimation of their ranks.

Yet did the Islamists believe at any point that they had lost the war? In 1997, the leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Ayman al-Zawahiri, assessed what had been achieved over the previous four decades: “We must admit that the movement’s goal of establishing an Islamic government in Egypt has yet to be achieved.” But he pointed out that the movement had not set a specific date for assuming power, which “could take several generations to achieve.” He added: “The Crusaders in Palestine and Syria left after two centuries of continued *jihad*....The British occupied Egypt for 70 years. The French occupied Algeria for 120 years.” He reassured his followers that the movement already had “gone a long way on the road to victory.” It had captured the enthusiasm of young people; it was “making progress in general. It may retreat or relax for awhile, but this happens because of campaigns of brutality or during periods of siege.”

Osama bin Laden once put it more succinctly: “War is war. Some days you win, some days you lose.” Even as the Taliban regime came down around him, in hails of hi-tech ordnance, Osama issued this reassurance: “God willing, the end of America is imminent...Regardless if Osama is killed or survives, the awakening has started, praised be to God. This was the fruit of these [9/11] operations.”

So in the absence of any successful seizure of power, Islamists broadcast the idea that they are bringing about an “awakening” that will produce more admirers, more recruits, and more resources for another bid somewhere down the road. After 9/11, some Islamists criticized Al-Qaeda for making strategic mistakes: its actions precipitated the fall of the Taliban, and the mass killing allowed the enemies of *jihad* to rally international and Muslim opinion. Not so, claimed Abu Ubeid al-Qurashi, a leader of Al-Qaeda. He compared 9/11 to the Palestinian attack on Israelis at the 1972 Munich Olympics. At the time, critics said that the operation failed to secure its stated objective (the release of Palestinian prisoners), and it alienated world opinion. In retrospect, said al-Qurashi, Munich was a tremendous success: it put the question of Palestinian suffering on the map. Only eighteen months later, Yasir Arafat himself spoke from the podium of the United Nations. In any case, Al-Qaeda “did not aspire to gain Western sympathy; rather, they sought to expose the American lie and deceit to the people of the world—and first and foremost to the Islamic peoples.” In that sense, 9/11 was a tremendous success, which would “gradually give rise to an all-out struggle against the American crusader campaign.”

For Islamists, the outcome of this generations-long struggle cannot be in doubt. Indeed, to doubt it would be to doubt Islam itself, for it cannot be God’s plan that Muslims forever submit to the superior power of the West and the hegemony of grasping America. Islamists are but people, and they make mistakes. But as God’s people they cannot be defeated; they can only defeat themselves.

Cease-fires allowed

While it would be unthinkable for Islamists to admit defeat, they have at times sought to negotiate cease-fires, usually for a specified duration. Such cease-fires have a precedent in the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, who signed treaties with enemies when it was in the interest of Muslims to do so.

A comparative study of Islamist cease-fires, and particularly the language in which they are formulated, has not been made. Examples abound, most notably from Egypt, Algeria, and the Palestinians. Even Al-Qaeda has offered temporary cease-fires, ostensibly to allow Muslim or European governments to reconsider their enmity toward the group. (Such offers are invariably accompanied by a threat of violence.) One conclusion seems inescapable: such cease-fire offers, especially when they are implemented unilaterally, are Islamist calls of distress, dressed in the formal

terminology of Islamic precedent. They arise when Islamists believe that they have lost the initiative, or have even been beaten into retreat. In many cases, they are offered at a point when many Islamist activists are in prison, and involve a demand for the release of prisoners as part of the cease-fire. In other cases, they come in the midst of liquidation campaigns directed against operatives and even leaders. The cease-fire, in this case, is meant to break the momentum of the opposing side.

Offers of cease-fire thus serve three purposes. They are designed to extricate Islamists from dead-ends, resulting from errors or failures. They are meant to appeal to Muslim public opinion, casting the Islamists as peace-seekers. And they are meant to save Islamist face, because a cease-fire is still not surrender, but is usually concluded between equal parties. In this case, the Islamists present themselves as the equals of their opponents: entrenched regimes and foreign powers.

A much-publicized example of such a cease-fire initiative involved the Palestinian Hamas in 2003. At the time, Israel's policy of targeted killing had begun to claim casualties in the higher ranks of the movement, after Israel discerned that such assassinations received tacit U.S. assent. Hamas leaders and high-level operatives lost mobility and went underground, yet were still targeted, creating concerns that the movement had been deeply penetrated by Israeli agents. In these circumstances, Hamas offered to enter into a *hudna*—a cease-fire—guaranteed by the Palestinian Authority. Hamas would end its “self-martyrdom” attacks in Israel proper; Israel would desist from targeted killings and free Palestinian prisoners. Israel, which was building momentum toward elimination of the very top Hamas leaders, had no interest in a cease-fire, and dismissed it as a ruse to allow Hamas to regroup. Hamas replied that such a cease-fire could be long-term if Israel ended its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. (It could not be permanent, since the Hamas position is that Israel is destined to disappear.) The cease-fire was never implemented, and in a matter of months, Israel eliminated the two leaders of Hamas in rapid succession.

Because of the concept of *jihad* as total warfare in some Islamist thinking, there are Islamists who regard cease-fires as mistakes at best and betrayals at worst, even though they can be sourced to the Qur'an. In Algeria and Egypt, Islamists split into factions over cease-fire initiatives; regimes did separate deals with factions willing to enter into cease-fires, offering pardons of prisoners in exchange for surrender of weapons. In both cases, *jihad* factions rejected the cease-fires and continued fighting from remote redoubts. Cease-fires are never absolute, but they are a bellwether of the sentiment among Islamists, and their proliferation is a clear sign that Islamists believe they have entered a cul-de-sac.

Ultimately, while there is only one Islamist metric of success—the seizure of power—there are many metrics of progress toward that aim. Each Islamist group and movement, in its propaganda, will celebrate gains and put setbacks in context. At present, Islamists allow that they have not achieved power, but they argue that this is a generations-long process, and

that they are closer to their objective than they were three or four decades ago when they first set out. It could just as readily be demonstrated that the involvement of the United States in the Muslim world has deepened, not lessened, to include regime change in Afghanistan, and sandwiching Iran between two countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, liberated by U.S. force. But whether Islamists are objectively right or wrong is immaterial, because the question is whether Islamists really are gaining still higher ground from which they might finally seize power. That depends on Muslim opinion, and since there are hardly any metrics at all by which to measure it, the question remains an open one.

7. Deterring Islamists

What do these people fear most? Is there something they supremely value—family, comrades, honor—the loss of which might deter them? What do they see as their own weaknesses, which might be exploited by enemies? Is there a difference in the effectiveness of deterrent measures used by internal (Muslim) actors and external (non-Muslim) actors? What is the most effective mix of coercive force and propaganda?

Abu Obeid al-Qurashi, an Al-Qaeda leader, has been quoted as saying: “The mujahideen have come to understand the enemy’s mentality and how his society functions; yet the enemy has no way of deterring the believer or influencing his mentality.” As we have seen, the first part of this proposition is only partly true. Islamists have a superficial understanding of the functioning of Western society, but not the “mentality” that underpins it. There remains the second part of the proposition: is it possible to deter Islamists or influence *their* “mentality”?

The debate over how best to do this has been a tug-and-pull between the two approaches of “war on terror” and “hearts and minds.” In fact, these two “alternatives” are not alternatives at all, since they are meant to serve different purposes. The “war on terror” is designed to prevent and preempt Islamist terror attacks now and in the near future. “Hearts and minds” is the long-term contest over the minds of the next several generations of Muslims.

The Islamists are motivated to strike, and gain recruits and sympathizers for further strikes, when they demonstrate that the real world conforms to their depiction of it. There are two crucial elements in that depiction.

First: the United States and its friends, clients, and proxies, are weak and impotent. They love life and its material comforts too much to stand their ground. They can be defeated by heavily out-gunned Muslims, provided those Muslims adhere to their belief in God and show themselves ready to sacrifice their lives. Each retreat of Islam’s enemies is then held up as proof with which to rally the next wave of assaults. As Osama bin Laden said to his cohorts after 9/11 (it was captured on video): “When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature, they will like the strong horse.” The United States, Israel, and Arab and Muslim regimes must be made to appear to be weak horses—slow, limping, gun-shy.

Second: coexistence with the West is a chimera, because it is waging a war against Islam. In whatever guise the enemy appears—the West, the United States, democracy—it is but a reincarnation of the Crusaders, who brought the cross to the Muslim East by the sword and through bloodshed. As Osama bin Laden puts it:

This war is fundamentally religious. The people of the East are Muslims. They sympathized with Muslims against the people of the West, who are the Crusaders. Those who try to cover this crystal-clear fact, which the entire world has admitted, are deceiving the Islamic nation. ...Under no circumstances should we forget this enmity between us and the infidels. For the enmity is based on creed.

Dispelling contempt

To deter Islamists, they must be made to doubt their own depiction of the West in general, and the United States in particular, as rotting colossi easily frightened into retreat. It is impossible to make them cease hating their enemies, since for Islamists, it is an article of faith that there is a struggle of cosmic significance underway between Islam and the West. But it is possible to persuade them that now is the wrong moment to court confrontation with American power, because the price of doing so could be the destruction of Islamism at its base. Islamists cannot be deterred unless and until they are made to acknowledge to themselves that they have underestimated the United States.

On October 20, 2001, the author of this paper delivered a speech in Washington to a policy conference. That analysis still stands today as the formula for preventing a recurrence of an attack against the United States on the scale of 9/11:

Perhaps there is rage against American power in these attacks. But there is even more contempt for America's weakness—its perceived lack of resolve, its quickness to forgive or at least forget, its penchant for creating categorical boxes—like the terrorism list—and then ignoring them altogether. This is perceived as weakness—and when you are perceived as weak in the Middle East, you become a tempting target and the vultures begin to circle. Needless to say, the images of the Twin Towers in flames and ashes have only compounded the problem. America now appears still weaker, more vulnerable than ever....

September 11 has to bring America to two realizations.

First, while it is good to be loved and admired, it is more important to be feared. And the United States is not sufficiently feared in the Middle East. If it wants to maintain its interests or even simply deter attacks against its own homeland, it is going to have to rectify the impression.

Second, while no one likes to be the target of hatred, it is far worse to be the subject of contempt....

But contempt can be banished, if you work at it. Let me summarize it this way: Nothing engenders greater respect in the Middle East than the rewarding of your friends, and the certain punishment of your enemies. Over the past two decades, the Unit-

ed States has gained a reputation for inconsistency on both counts. That has left America more vulnerable.

American credibility cannot be reestablished overnight. But the United States has now been given an opportunity, a license, to rebuild it. It is the gift given by the thousands who perished. This second chance must not be missed—not only if U.S. interests are to be defended abroad, but if the American way of life is to be preserved at home.

And in the region, this means you must smite your enemy in a decisive and demonstrative way.

Nearly three years later, the actions taken by the United States, under the rubric of the “war on terror,” have left it much more hated, but much more feared. It is more hated precisely because its actions have wreaked havoc with the Islamist presumption of American weakness. The United States did not play its anticipated role in the aftermath of 9/11. It displayed its power, and it exacted a price. Contrary to the assurances of Osama bin Laden, it did not reenact the withdrawals from Beirut and Mogadishu. Instead it removed regimes in Kabul and Baghdad. Many aspects of these massive interventions—unprecedented in the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East—are subject to debate as to their ultimate effects. But one thing is certain: the United States after 9/11 defied Islamist predictions. Islamists must acknowledge, at least to themselves, that something in their understanding of the United States is flawed.

Islamist terrorism continues, but it has not revisited U.S. shores. Instead, Islamists seek out weak links in the U.S.-led coalition, and work to break them through intimidation. Here the costs are lower, and the potential for success is greater. Iraq is a place where the coalition is stretched particularly thin, and it has become a focus of Islamist efforts to reestablish the validity of their claims. But it is a sign of the post-9/11 success of U.S. policy in reestablishing deterrence that Islamist terrorism has fixed itself on Iraq, and on certain European and Muslim countries. The “war on terror” has pushed the front back, away from the homeland.

What are the precise counter-measures that Islamists fear? They claim to be without fear and beyond deterrence, but actual experience in many settings has established what does and does not have a deterrent effect. For example, in Israel’s war with Hamas since 2000, many counter-measures were shown to be ineffective. Collective punishments such as demolitions of the houses of suicide bombers had only a limited impact, since Hamas had the material resources to compensate for damages. (Israel could not exact a higher price from families, given its own self-imposed legal and ethical limitations.) Israeli reoccupation of much of the West Bank, in the spring of 2002, made possible a systematic manhunt of Hamas operatives, compelling the organization to invest much of its energy in self-preservation. But it was only Israel’s targeted assassinations of the top leaders of Hamas that changed the balance. Only when Israel be-

gan to eliminate parts of the Hamas structure that were irreplaceable—the highest echelons—did Hamas mothball its mobile assembly line of suicide bombers.

In some Arab states, the regimes do not assassinate their Islamist opponents, but they operate against them without significant checks on their methods. Using the panoply of means—including arrest, torture, trial, confiscation, and expulsion—they have succeeded in breaking the resolve of many Islamist groups, compelling them to sue for cease-fires. The legality and morality of such coercive methods are questionable, but their success is not.

In the case of groups like Al-Qaeda, deterrence is more elusive. Al-Qaeda, as well as other fragmentary groups that preceded it and may succeed it, do not have a social or territorial base. They are composed of the flotsam of discontent generated across the entire spectrum of the Arab-Muslim world—people who no longer have a meaningful connection to a place, a family, or a community. The first requirement of a recruit is a willingness to die, and an apocalyptic element may govern the group, so that collective “self-martyrdom” may become an objective unto itself. Such groups may be programmed to self-destruct. Search, capture, and destroy is often the only option.

What works against one group or movement may not work against another. Non-Muslim powers and Muslim regimes also have very different toolboxes. The former are adept at using decisive military force and regulated legal procedure, which enjoy wide sanction in American political culture. Muslim regimes prefer violent, coercive intimidation and cooptation bargains, both of which are acceptable in Middle Eastern political culture. Islamists have been deterred and defeated using both approaches. It can be done, and it is done, every day. This is not a labor of Sisyphus; it does progress.

Choosing friends

Deterring Islamists is an urgent and immediate objective, and demands a resolute use of force. Discrediting the idea that the United States is waging a war against Islam is long-term objective, and is ultimately an exercise in persuasion. Again, the objective is to demonstrate that the Islamist depiction of the world is disproved by real experience, and that the fundamental premise of Islamism—the absolute conflict of interest between Islam and unbelief—is a false dichotomy.

This may well be a labor of Sisyphus. The Arab-Muslim world is in a long-term crisis, the effect of which is to widen the social, economic, and technological gaps between Muslims and just about everyone else. The United States is admonishing the Muslim world to see this problem as an internal crisis that must be resolved through reform. The claim of Islamists—and not only Islamists—is that the problem is external, and that Muslims are victims of a conspiracy to keep them weak and oppressed. For Muslims to accept the idea that the problem is internal, they must ad-

mit not only that their assumptions about the United States are flawed. They must admit that their own philosophical underpinnings, including their faith, are in acute need of reformulation and reformation.

In the meantime, the most tangible way for the United States to demonstrate the falsity of the “war against Islam” presumption of Islamists is to have visible Arab and Muslim allies. The dilemma here is an obvious one: which Arabs and Muslims? Should they be the rulers in their palaces? These have been the traditional friends of the United States, and they have demonstrated their staying power in countless confrontations with opponents. Or should they be the “people” or the “street,” wooed with U.S. pledges to back “democracy” and propagandized by U.S.-run media? The future may be theirs, although in the short term they are instinctively anti-American and incapable of translating their frustration into constructive politics.

The United States is attempting to cover both bases, backing allied regimes yet nudging them toward reform, countering Islamist populism while promoting “democracy.” The difficulties of keeping such a policy on an even keel are beyond the scope of this study. However, the pursuit of “hearts and minds” could impact upon the parallel efforts to deter Islamist terrorism.

First, it could lead the United States to propound what the Islamists have argued all along: that the existing order is illegitimate. For decades, Islamists have claimed that the regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere rest on usurped authority. The U.S. and Islamist visions for the region are diametrically opposed, but neither is likely to be fully realized. What can be realized in the shorter term is a more thorough de-legitimizing of the present order, if the United States lends its weight to it. Paradoxically, the post-9/11 distancing of the United States from some of its Arab-Muslim allies is precisely one of the objectives Al-Qaeda sought to achieve by its attacks.

Second, promoting change could lend credibility to the argument that even if the United States is standing its ground (for now), it is a fickle friend and disloyal to those Muslims who have stood with it. This could leave the United States friendless in important parts of the Arab and Muslim world, paradoxically confirming the second Islamist presumption: the United States has no Muslim allies, because it is waging a war against Islam.

“Hearts and minds” as a pursuit is meant to complement the “war on terror,” whose immediacy should assure it a place of primacy. But in certain configurations, “hearts and minds” could undermine the war. Islamists have argued that they cannot be defeated—except by themselves. In their case, the notion is pure bravado. But the idea that only the United States can defeat the United States may be a closer approximation of the truth. Ultimately, the surest way to deter Islamists is to construct a unified U.S. policy, which prioritizes deterrence as an objective that trumps any other objective. The stabilization of such a policy will constitute one of the

most important challenges in American long-term strategy over the next decade.